

Early Fairbury Photographer E.M. Phillips

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The story of early Fairbury photographer E.M. Phillips began with the birth of his father, Jacklin Phillips, in 1823 in West Virginia. When Jacklin Phillips was nine years old, he moved with his family to Franklin County, Indiana. In Indiana, he met Margaret McQuig, whom he married in 1840. Jacklin and Margaret had five children. Jacklin Phillips moved his family to Fairbury in 1859. Jacklin Phillips was 60 years old when he died. He was buried in the Fairbury Cemetery in 1883.

One son of Jacklin and Margaret Phillips was Edward McQuig Phillips. He was born in Indiana in 1854. When he was five years old, his family moved to Fairbury. E.M. Phillips married Miss Frances Munhall in 1875 in Livingston County. Their only child, Mayme Phillips, was born in 1882. She graduated from Fairbury Township High School when she was 16 years old.

In the 1880 U.S. Census, E.M. Phillips reported his occupation as working in a Fairbury flour mill. It is likely that sometime after 1880, Mr. Phillips started working in the photography gallery in the store of the Watson Brothers.

In 1888, Watson Brothers sold its photography department to E.M. Phillips. Later that year, the Blade recounted that E.M. Phillips had a significant demand for life-size ink drawings.

In 1889, E.M. Phillips took photos of the Fairbury Township High School graduating class at the Fairbury Opera House. In that era, high school graduations were held in the Opera House. In 1890, photographer E.M. Phillips entered crayon drawings and photograph collections in the Fairbury Fair.

In that era, Fairbury merchants would sponsor a Carnival in the Opera House to attract shoppers to Fairbury. The merchants had a unique dress designed for a young girl that included products of their business. For example, for Straight's Milling Company, Fribbie Filley's hat was prettily decorated with ears of corn, grain, and fancy grass. Another example was the bank of Bartlett, Beach, and Dominy. The bank attired young Jessie Dominy in a black silk dress lavishly ornamented with paper money and coins. In 1893, E.M. Phillips sponsored Miss Dora Eads in the contest. Miss Eads won the prize of a gold ring offered by A.H. Mundt for being the most appropriately dressed in the competition.

Alma Lewis James, the author of the Fairbury history book, *Stuffed Clubs & Antimacassars*, recounted that Fairbury merchants often published poems to entice customers to visit their store. Alma wrote that E.M. Phillips used such a poem to try to attract customers to his photography gallery upstairs at Walton's. One of his poems was, "If you cannot cross the country, Or the foreign lands explore, You can spend your

money nearer, There are Klondikes at your door, Down on Main Street there is Phillips, Over Walton's Store, With his every-ready camera, He will meet you at the door." A Klondike was an enclosed buggy that became popular with farmers in the wintertime.

Robert Brunskill worked as an assistant to E.M. Phillips in his photography business. In 1895, Robert Brunskill married Flora Driggs from McDowell. In 1896, Walton Brothers experienced its second massive fire in Fairbury. The blaze destroyed the photography business of E.M. Phillips. In 1897, E.M. Phillips tried to sell his photography gallery. Unfortunately, he had to take it back and operate it.

In 1900, E.M. Phillips sold his Fairbury photography business. Mr. Phillips purchased a photograph gallery in Danville, Illinois. The Blade recounted that E.M. Phillips was one of the best photographers in the country with his many years of experience. The Blade also noted that Mr. Phillips always kept himself well posted in the latest discoveries in his chosen art. Mr. Phillips told the Blade the only reason he was leaving Fairbury was to gain a more extensive customer base for his photography business.

The only child of Mr. and Mrs. Phillips was Mayme Phillips. She finished Fairbury Township High School in 1898 at age sixteen. She then attended Eastern Illinois Normal school at Charleston. After her college graduation, she became a teaching career in Danville. She taught school in Danville for the rest of her life. Mayme never married and died in 1921.

Besides a broader market for his photography business, E.M. Phillips had other reasons to choose to move to Danville. Two of his brothers, John and Edward, were living in Danville. His brother John Phillips in 1860, became an assistant to a deaf photographer in Fairbury. In 1871, John moved to Danville. John eventually owned an extensive laundry service in Danville. John Phillips died in 1915 and was buried in Danville.

E.M. Phillips' sister, Orra Phillips, also lived in Danville. She initially attended Fairbury schools and graduated in the first high school class to graduate in Fairbury. She taught grade school in Fairbury for many years. In 1896, she moved to Danville and became a school teacher there. She never married and was a school teacher her entire life. She died in 1930 in Danville.

After E.M. Phillips moved to Danville, he eventually switched from photography to the real estate field. He was very active in the Danville community and was a member of the Elks, the I.O.O.F. Lodge, and St. James Methodist Church.

Mrs. E.M. Phillips died in Danville in 1930 at age 75. Mr. Phillips died in 1932 at the age of 78. Both of them were buried in Danville.

Mr. E.M. Phillips operated his Fairbury photography business between 1880 and 1900. It is incredible that some of E.M. Phillips's old photos still survive today. Even though some of his photos are over 130 years old, they are still in excellent condition.

The Fairbury Echoes Museum has a new display with information about many early photographers, including E.M. Phillips. Admission to the museum is free, and the new collection is a fascinating review of Fairbury's photographic history.



E.M. Phillips photo of two children and a doll.